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The Imperial College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco

*The First School of Translators and Interpreters
in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America*¹

The foundation and scope of teaching centres in sixteenth century Nueva España, in particular the Imperial College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco and the one in Cuauhtitlán, as well as the role they played, need to be re-examined from another standpoint in the history of translation.

Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, the first major school of interpreters and translators in the New World, was founded around 1573 and reformed about forty years later. Its role is in many ways reminiscent of the one played in Europe by the famous Toledo School founded by Bishop Ramon in Alfonso el Sabio's time. Most of the evidence referring to Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco emphasizes that its foundation, as well as that of similar institutions, was influenced by three powers: the Crown, His Holiness the Pope, and the absolute and all-embracing Order of Saint Francis. Its foundation facilitated its performance as a training centre for the future native Mexican ruling elite and supplanted — rather than balanced — the role that the *calmecac* or *teipochcalli* played in the general

education of Nahuas of noble birth, especially in religious matters. The *calmecac* or *tepochcalli* operated as special schools where, among other subjects, the interpreting art of pre-phonetics and the hieroglyphic writing of pictograph codes were taught. The Mexican scribes trained there were responsible for transcribing on *amate* or vegetable paper the magical or religious thinking as well as the habits and customs of the people.

Several analysts have surmised that, for the priests, it was a matter not only of guiding the training of the future ruling class at Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, but also of laying the foundation for a regular Mexican clergy. The idea of educating the ruling class there from early childhood according to the principles and commandments of the Catholic Church as well as the canons of European culture was obviously a main tenet. Probably some subjects were included at a senior level for the purpose of creating an elite group of students from which the first Mexican Catholic priests would be selected, although this was not the main objective.

Other researchers have suggested a third hypothesis: that the top priority of these centres was the training of native linguists with the ability to perform a sort of spiritual intermingling to reconcile cultural spheres as well as challenge Renaissance humanism and meso-American wisdom in several respects:

- By eradicating their idolatries. To this end, the priests' bilingual (Náhuatl and Castilian) re-writing and/or re-wording of their ancestors' memories written in original text either vanished without a trace or were engulfed in flames before their very eyes, causing them "incidentally" to retrace the path to the sense of their own beliefs for themselves.
- By preparing them to work as translators and interpreters in order to support the pastoral priests' attempt to indoctrinate by linguistically backing their advocacy of the Christian religion.
- By teaching them to undertake translation and interpretation of the Christian religion's sacred texts directly into native tongues, mainly Náhuatl.

Our work here aims to support the third hypothesis as being of undeniable significance for the history of translation and interpretation in America.

Location and origin

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, the pioneer ethnographer of sixteenth-century Aztec Mexico, obsessed with the idea of exterminating any idolatrous practices by the natives, was involved in renaming places using historical references. Under a spring in Xochimilco, he found a stone idol to which the natives offered copal. Aware of the significance that the natives accorded the water and mountains, he took away the idol and replaced it with a cross, christening the place Santa Cruz, as it was called from then on.

Ideological background

Invaders did not respect the indigenous culture. With the Conquest, the *calmecac* and *telpochcalli* disappeared, and with them, traces of their teachings were lost. Because the temples and monuments, codes and books were completely destroyed, when it became necessary to obtain accurate and substantive information about the past, recourse had to be made to the remaining evidence: the essential facts and history were reflected through the glyphs.

When speaking about the codices in terms of their significance in cultural history as an advanced system relying on material support to represent human thinking, one tends to mention only those codices that replaced the papyrus rolls of the Greeks and Romans in the second and third centuries AD. Fernando R. Lafuente, for instance, referring to the appearance of the codex in Europe only, without mentioning its presence in the former indigenous cultures of Middle America, pointed out how its emergence allowed new gestures, like leafing through a work or writing and reading at the same time, and how important the experience was for authors or scribes in organizing

the transmission of thoughts in a new way, in books, parts, or chapters of a single discourse.²

Of course, this suppression of evidence was in line with the aims of the Christianization process, but later it became imperative to carry out pastoral work with a functional approach, focused on a native, concrete and supposedly omnipresent audience. With the heir to this knowledge and the repository of the same memory destroyed, it was obvious that the possibility of decoding that valuable data was irretrievably lost. Besides, the priests were obliged to resort to oral sources, taking advantage of the fact that most legends had been transmitted from one generation to another by oral tradition. The Mexicans used to hold informal meetings where the elderly members of the communities recounted their memories. And that is why the teachers in Santa Cruz, when looking for information, and interested in investigating the primary sources, were compelled to turn to the collective memory of those wise, elderly men. The latter had etched on their memories what the codices contained, not only about the origins of the religious pantheon and its presence in the imaginations of the people or about how the individuals managed to cook or process *pulque* (a Mexican drink), but also about the background of the moral, poetic and religious discourses which allowed them to reconstruct the history or at least the anecdotal discourse. The history was therefore reconstructed in two alternate voices influenced by the respective idiolects of narrators and mediators.

In Chapter XI, Book VI of *Historia General de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, the main author, describes and comments on the indigenous beliefs about rhetoric, philosophy and theology before the arrival of the Conquerors in Nueva España. The famous Franciscan warned against the *calmecac*, calling them satanic inventions and a source of idolatry. The implicit criticism contained in the seventh reprimand of the 1486 Manuscript³ did not escape Georges Baudot:⁴

Here starts the seventh reprimand with which our Mother, the Holy Roman Church, admonished the people here, in Nueva

España, with regard to the rules they applied in the old days when they engaged their children to be accepted to the *calmecac* or *telpochcalli*. . . . That's why you must beware and be informed, so I want to relate to you everything I know about the things that happened there once they were admitted to the *calmecac* or to the *telpochcalli*. Because the elders told me everything they have seen there once they have been christened, because they have been marked in, and because they have lived in, when they have approached Our Lord God, and they have related to me everything that I'm relating to you now, warning you about the common practices in the *calmecac* or *telpochcalli*. [our translation]⁵

Selection of students

Having analyzed the political orientation of education allowed by the priests in those major schools in Mexico, we must note the following:

- The first feature that is patently obvious is the essentially selective and class-conscious nature of those centres.
- “*Since the children of the Caciques, the future ruling class of Indians, were educated from childhood in the principles of our Catholic faith, our Order has founded colleges*” [our translation]. This is clearly stated in Law XI of the Compilation of Indian Laws (23rd ed., Book I).

According to the Charter of the Imperial College of Santa Cruz, an essential requirement for acceptance as a student was to be: “*an Indian born of a legitimate marriage, from Caciques or noble birth and not of 'macegual', despicable or blemished origin, or marked because of their own vulgar behaviour or that of their parents*” [our translation].⁶

From the very beginning, origin and lineage were binding prerequisites to being selected to receive this kind of education in the Spanish colonies. Hernan Cortez chose Indians, neither light-heartedly nor fortuitously, to take with him to Spain. The Franciscan missionaries learned

their first words in Náhuatl from those selected Indians when they made the trip back to the New World together one year later. Francisco del Paso y Troncoso recovered the complete list of native travelers with the help of historian Chimalpahin-Cuauhtlehuanitzin, who fortunately made a note in a copy of the first edition, Chapter 62, Volume II of the *Historia de la Conquista de Méjico* by López de Gómura.⁷

The selective and discriminatory approach that characterizes the requirements for being entitled to an education in Latin America, and therefore for having access to general educational institutions and the teaching of the catechism, which surprisingly applied to an increasing number of students,⁸ would generate a problem of reversal that five centuries later is not as yet resolved in favour of the huge population descended from the Indians on this continent.

Problems encountered and teaching orientation

The topics that made up the Tlatelolco curricula are known, as are the results achieved by an outstanding group of trilingual residents headed by Alonso Vegerano of Cuauhtitlán and Antonio Valeriano of Azcapotzalco under the tutelage of Bernardino de Sahagún and his co-workers, mainly Fray Arnaldo Bassacio and Fray Andrés de Olmos.

It was common knowledge that divergent views were expressed concerning the policies applied in these colleges. Dissent from the mouths of distinguished clergy members was voiced by Fray Toribio de Paredes or Benavente, better known as Motolínea. There was a great deal of argument with Motolínea about the treatment of the Indians by the priests in Santa Cruz concerning idolatry, the teaching of grammar and, in general, the way that Sahagún conceived and carried out his pastoral mission. We must add that the few Santa Cruz teachers/interpreters/translators were forced to improvise a good deal and overcome many technical difficulties since they did not have even lexical guides or manuals except those that they developed themselves with determination, inventiveness, and individual talent.⁹ While trying to learn a foreign tongue, they taught Latin, grammar, arts, basic theology, and music.

Mendieta and Motolínea identified an indigenous *bachiller*, born in Cuautla, as Miguel, a good Ladino. Ignacio Bernal believes that he was really the famous Valeriano de Azcapotzalco, who worked as a scribe/translator on the *Libro de los Colloquios* for Fray Bernardino.

In the 1569¹⁰ Report of the Santo Evangelio Province addressed to Ovando, the objectives of completing the priests' work with the Santa Cruz students were clearly outlined. "Once some Indians knew Latin and were able to understand the mysteries contained in the Holy Scriptures, they could become more attached to the faith in order to transmit to others who were less prepared what the priests could not explain by themselves in the native tongues. They could then preach and interpret for them" [our translation].

The Ovando Report cited the permanent exchange of knowledge between Indians and priests, making the former not only ideal teachers of their own language but also the sole reliable judges for evaluating and amending the resulting texts. In doing so, they vigorously challenged claims about the so-called inferiority of the natives as compared to the Europeans, even though the translation of the sacred texts into common language according to the criteria of the time could not be more than an "interpretation": "Those who have learned their language are now the same as those that have been their teachers, learning to translate into that tongue what is written in their books, and they are now interpreting in the Hearings"¹¹ [our translation].

The most outstanding graduates of Tlatelolco accomplished the cardinal duty of bringing linguistic support to the Christianization process with so much skill and quality that Fray Bernardino, their main mentor, did not hesitate to admit his dependence on his "grammarians residents" when any text needed to be translated "into correct vernacular Náhuatl."¹² He did not spare any praise when speaking of their work:

If they have succeeded in expressing sermons and *postillas* in a native tongue that could be considered purified of any heresy, it is because they have done work that fosters the proper understanding of Latin as well as the properties of the words and the means to express them.

Besides, they are able to amend any inconsistencies in the sermons or texts to the point that anything that must be worded correctly in their language ought first to be evaluated by them. . . .¹³ [our translation]

The intuitive ability displayed by the Tlatelolco tutors as well as by their main mentor to carry out this twofold cultural intermingling is phenomenal. Addressing pastoral and academic concerns together as was done in the Toledo School allowed Fray Bernardino to produce more and more complete translations on the subjects treated in the *Historia General*, *Sermonarios*, *Doctrina cristiana*, *Libro de los Colloquios*, *Vocabulario de tres lenguas*, *Psalmodia*, and *Postilla*, to mention only his most famous works. He was also able to accomplish the final check of *Sermonarios* under the supervision of the trilingual translators and even make good use of their collaboration as amanuenses of his own writings, because his handwriting worsened due not only to age but also to the after-effects of the terrible Black Death plague that ravaged Mexico in 1545.

A detailed study compared the American versions of the sacred literature developed by Tlatelolco scholars with its sources in the Old and New Testaments. If we consider the omissions, additions, adaptations, and emphatic elements contained in the American version, it is possible to advance some interesting and fairly relevant theories about what the priests ascertained to be the most convenient way to introduce the Biblical texts, making them less shocking to the Indians of the New Continent. But it is also evident from the numerous handwritten copies and transcriptions of both historical and doctrinal texts aimed at facilitating their use, that manipulation and preservation were neither effected by the staff responsible for making the originals nor authenticated by Sahagún. That is why the texts are not necessarily free of additions, amendments, and interpretations of calligraphy. Depending on the culture of the curators in charge and their perception of the contents, some words were replaced by alleged synonyms. Those subsequent changes — that sometimes fit the context — were not always

equivalent to what they replaced. Therefore, not all the extant versions are Santa Cruz originals; some are copies of copies.

At the same time, this huge and important translation and interpretation movement was of course part of the early stages of the Christianization process carried out by the priests as an essential complement to the Conquest. However, this movement was slowed and then finally aborted or concealed during the last quarter of the century because of the Ecumenical Council of Trent in 1564. This was in keeping with restrictive measures already adopted regarding Bible translation into the common languages. These measures had been adopted to counter the Protestant hardships endured by the Santo Oficio de la Inquisición Court, especially since those hardships had not resolved the still unforgotten old battle to make Castilian the "imperial language," displacing the common indigenous languages.

Furthermore, if we examine some comments concerning the translations of Sahagún's *Psalmodia*, for example, done by Tlatelolco students, it is obvious that the plurality of languages was indeed associated with the origin of the idolatries. Their origin was clearly associated with the New Testament account of the Pentecost "gift of speech" and with the conversion of the idols by Saint Matthew. Last but not least, is the parallelism, real or spurious, between the Tower of Babel and the Cholula Pyramid, which like the Biblical structure was also linked with divine punishment as well as with the multiplicity of languages and heresies. In 1570, in spite of their objectives and interests, the Crown and the Pope had no alternative but to declare Náhuatl, not Spanish, the official language in Nueva España.

An abstraction of the avatars suffered specifically in Sahagún's doctrinal and historical corpus was motivated by his disagreements with powerful members of the clergy, in the metropolis as well as in the Mexican Chapter, who put up serious obstacles to the spread of indigenous languages for reasons that had no connection with the Council of Trent. Five centuries later, we see a relative proliferation of manuscripts and versions of those still-unpublished texts.¹⁴ They were generated mostly in Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, where an amazing staff of specialists was

responsible for this outstanding example of high culture.

This huge body of work has been lost in transit between monasteries, libraries, private collections and archives around the world — consigned to obscurity, and with it any trace of its anonymous creators: the translators and interpreters who worked in the Imperial College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco in the sixteenth century. It has reappeared only recently, to be recovered and reassessed in every aspect, as it deserves to be.

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Notes

1. The author would like to thank Kristen Guertin and Malcolm Williams for their thorough revision of this English version.
2. In Rodriguez Lafuente (2001).
3. Bernardino de Sahagún. *Apéndices a la Historia General*. Chapter 5, Manuscript 1486 of the “Edmond E. Ayer” Collection (without page numbering), Newberry Library, Chicago.
4. Editor and translator of the *Tratado de hechicerías y sortilegios* by Andrés de Olmos, another famous priest who was Sahagún’s contemporary.
5. “Aquí comienza la séptima admonición con la cual nuestra Madre, la Santa Iglesia Romana, amonesta a las gentes de aquí, de la Nueva España, acerca de los preceptos que antiguamente tenían cuando prometían a sus hijos para que ingresasen al **calmecac** o al **telpochcalli** . . . por esto debeis ser instruídos y debeis ser informados, yo quiero referiros todo lo que yo se acerca de lo que se hacía allí cuando ingresaban al **calmecac**, al **telpochcalli**. Porque me lo dijeron los ancianos que allí habían sido señalados, que allí vivieron, todo lo que allí vieron cuando ya fueron bautizados, cuando se acercaron a Nuestro Señor Dios narraron lo que ahora quiero referiros para que no vivais inadvertidos acerca de lo que eran las costumbres en el **calmecac** o en el **telpochcalli**.”
6. *Constituciones del Imperial Colegio de Santa Cruz*, Real Academia de la Historia. Col. Boturini, XIX, 101.
7. There were two sons of Moctezuma: don Pedro Motecuhzoma Tlacahuepan and don Martín Cortés Nezahualtecoltl; his brother Tezozómoc’s children,

don Francisco de Alvarado Matlacoahuatzin, and don Gaspar Tultequitzin, another relative in the second line of nobility; two *Mexicas caciques*, don Hernando de Tápia and Damián Tlacocheacatl, someone called don Gabriel, son of the latest king of Tlacopán Tetelepanquetzaltzin; don Jerónimo Conchano, a descendant of the kings of Tlatelolco; another of the kings of Culhuacán, don Baltazar Toquezquahyotzin; don Juan Tzihuácmítl, himself a descendant of the Cempoalá monarchy; another of the lords of Cuitláhuac; don Felipe de Castilla Monialquatzin, a *cacique* belonging to the dignitaries of Tlamanalco; don Pedro de Castañeda Colomóhcatl; and other knights and lords of the nobility of the country.

8. The priests had the monopoly on religious education until 1584.
9. For example, the *Arte y vocabulario de la lengua mexicana* by Fray Francisco Jiménez, quoted by Mendieta, had already been written when the first twelve priests arrived in Nueva España to evangelize the region.
10. García Izcalbalceta (1941 [1889]), II, 62.
11. *Ibid.*, 62.
12. Sahagún (1956), III, 167.
13. *Ibid.*, 635.
14. *The Psalmodia Christiana* (1583) was the sole text printed while the authors were alive.

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